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AUTHOR Hu, Helen Chau
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ABSTRACT

It is argued that non-academic texts should be included as instructional materials for teaching college-level reading and writing skills, and recommends dialogues such as edited transcripts of interviews. Advantages cited include: better student comprehension of contemporary modes of discourse; clear relationships between grammar and communicative function; and likelihood of sustained textual coherence. An excerpt from an interview with John Lennon is presented as an example of a text offering students a variety of interpretive challenges that hinge on rhetorical and cohesion devices. Pragmatic and semantic elements in the text are discussed, and four exercises exploiting the instructional potential of the dialogue are outlined and their instructional values explored. The first is a series of comprehension questions hinging on inferences and conceptual links. The second requires students to rewrite the content of the excerpt in their own words and restructure it as a paragraph. The third exercise requires students to think about use of elliptical forms and lexical contractions, and the fourth focuses on the differences between fact and opinion and on the cultural nature of opinion. Contains 10 references. (MSE)

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Approaching Integrated Reading and Writing Using General Texts[1]

by

Helen Chau Hu
California State University, Long Beach, California

Abstract

Non-academic texts should be included in the teaching of reading and writing because they share with academic texts the characteristic--*interpretation*--underlying the requisite strategies, and yet sustain learner interest. Using a "dialogue" text and providing some step-by-step exercises for developing reading and writing proficiencies at different levels of difficulty, this paper points out areas requiring attention, and describes the strategies for dealing with them.

A frequently-repeated observation is that many freshman students in college today have not been adequately prepared for academic writing (Johns, 1995, p. 181). And when they do write at all, their writing is often episodic, directed at the self, and devoid of causal relations. There are typically both fragments and run-on sentences, and out-of-place colloquialisms--just to name a few characteristics. For such students, if a programme of the English-for-academic-purposes variety, or writing-across-the-curriculum variety, could be of any benefit at all (Ramananthan and Kaplan, 1996), it certainly would not be at the initial stage. That is to say, these students should at the very beginning be introduced to general writing, not writing for particular disciplines (Raimes and Zamel, 1997; Spack, 1988). Specifically, the present author believes that there is a need for including general texts, articles from magazines and newspapers being some of them. And those general texts called

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"dialogue" texts (Newmark, 1988, p. 13) have been found especially useful: edited transcripts of interviews, for example.

The above notwithstanding, the suggestion is not made here that the dialogue text is the *only* kind of text that should be studied. One could in fact raise legitimate concerns to the effect that some aspects of the nature and quality of recorded speech make such texts difficult reading matter, and thus inappropriate pedagogical material. The stand taken here is simply that on balance, the dialogue text does appear to be a well-placed springboard from which learners can make their mental leap, as will be explained in the next paragraph. The pedagogical significance here lies in the devising of a methodology focusing on the interpretative nature of reading, wherein reading is not taken to be a matter of reacting to the text, but of the "*interaction* between writer and reader mediated through the text," arriving at meaning as a consequence (Widdowson, 1979, p. 174). Hence, any text-type that works well with such methodology would be appropriate. And, indeed, in time, texts with more syntactic and semantic complexities can and should be introduced, with learners moving on to drama, expository, and eventually, literary texts. They are supplements and complements to each other. The undisputed fact is that, sooner or later, the successful learner will have to be schooled in all of them.

The advantages of dialogue texts are numerous, the most significant ones being the following. One sensible pedagogical assumption is that comprehension would be easier if the mode of discourse chosen is one with which the contemporary reader is familiar, where evidence of "the merging of the oral and literate traditions" abound (Lakoff, 1982, p. 260). Dialogues fall into that category. Furthermore, since a dialogue text offers a natural environment in which the two aspects of language--the spoken and the written--co-occur, it is an ideal context for relationships between grammatical form and communicative function to be brought to the fore. Remedial students at the university level should particularly welcome this type of exposure since they are usually at a point where their linguistic capacity needs to be made use of immediately, to handle communicative tasks. While only the receptive aspect of communicative competence is attended to in text analysis, extending the students' reach to writing would call the productive aspect into action. Having had students study a dialogue text in depth, with their understanding so derived tested by way of comprehension questions, an instructor could ask them to present some parts of it in the formal written mode, or to re-present them to different kinds of imagined audience and on a variety of occasions. This process would appear to be a rather smooth and painless progression from reading to writing, naturally integrating the two. Lastly, a dialogue means that there are two participants engaged in normal social interchange. In such a situation, the interlocutors are most likely obliged to sustain coherence by one means or another. For interviews, additional factors such as common courtesy, the desire to maintain interest, and the need to fill information gaps and to generate substance, make coherence even more of a significant element. And achieving coherence is, indeed, one important capacity that has to be developed in the learner. Having observed coherence explicitly displayed in a setting

where the speaker has an overt audience to address, remedial students are likely to become more keenly aware of its effect in writing, when normally the readership is readership in absentia.

Before a sample text is introduced, a few quick words regarding the present author's viewpoints on reading and writing are in order. It has been said that two kinds of discriminating capacities (Widdowson, 1983, p. 23ff) are required for learners to perform satisfactorily in their academic tasks. The first is the extensive kind, to be developed as an independent activity, similar to the activity demanded of general readers, such as those reading newspapers for information or novels for pleasure and relaxation. They need not be conscious of *how* interpretation comes about, and are more likely than not unaware of the process. The second kind of discriminating capacity is intensive, is anything but independent, and is simply an initial activity to be integrated with the later activity of writing. This second capacity requires that the reader consciously align the *what* with the *how*. Indeed, academic skills requisite at the university level are those mostly associated with this second kind of capacity, and awareness of rhetorical and cohesion devices, among others, is part of that capacity. These devices will figure prominently in the dialogue excerpt below, taken from an interview transcript.[2] The areas which would most likely cause comprehension difficulties will first be discussed, and the strategies for dealing with them follow. Such steps should help learners negotiate obstructions in their path, and move closer to effective textual interpretation.

An Excerpt from a Dialogue Text

[Interviewer:] Why five years?

John Lennon: If you know your history, it took us a long time to have a live baby. And I wanted to give five solid years to Sean. I hadn't seen Julian, my first son [by his ex-wife, Cynthia], grow up at all, and now there's a 17-year-old man on the phone talkin' about motorbikes. I'm an avid reader, mainly history, archeology and anthropology. In other cultures, children don't leave the mother's back until 2. I think most schools are prisons--a child's thing is wide open and to narrow it down and make him compete in the classroom is a joke. I sent Sean to kindergarten. When I realized I was sending him there to get rid of him, I let him come home . . . If I don't give him attention at 5, then I'm gonna have to give him double doses of it in his teen-age years. It's owed.

---

[2] "The Real John Lennon," *Newsweek* (September 29, 1980).

In the excerpt there are two related components in text processing: the pragmatic and the semantic. The first component is associated with knowledge of the world of facts and conventions, whereas the second is pertinent to grammatical knowledge. It is worth noting that these components are not independent of each other, and the proper understanding of a text would be hindered if the learner does not go beyond one component to the other. Content deduction, for example, relies not only on learners' grammatical knowledge but also on pragmatic knowledge, subsumed under which label are, among other things, metaphoric extensions, personal experiences, cultural references, and idiosyncratic styles. Moreover, a great deal of lexical meanings are not straightforward, owing to the swift changes of verb tense, mood, and person. The excerpt used here, an entire paragraph in response to the single question *Why five years?* asked by the reporter, makes good material for the study of coherence. The instructor should ask pertinent questions at various points, so that a presumed quiet dialogue between the learner-reader and author could be sustained, and information gaps filled in the process. Such a dialogue will eventually lead to writing. Exercise A below, designed to challenge learner-readers to come up with appropriate interpretations, is an illustration. Sample answers are provided in square brackets.

Exercise A

(1) What kind of babies did the Lennons have before Sean?
[**Answer**: They had dead babies.]

(2) How did Lennon feel about missing the opportunity to see his first son grow up?
[**Answer**: He regretted it.]

(3) Why do you think Lennon likened schools to prisons?
[**Answer**: In his view, both restricted the growth of the mind and freedom of thought.]

(4) What does *thing* in "a child's thing" actually mean?
[**Answer**: It stands for *world, mind,* or *intellect*.]

(5) What reasons did Lennon have to teach Sean at home?

(6) An alternate way to pose Question 5 is to ask learners to fill in the blanks below:

(i) Lennon did not think that _____ would do a good job at nurturing a child's mind.
[**Answer**: kindergartens]

(ii) He also thought that in sending Sean to kindergarten, he _____.
[**Answer**: was getting rid of him]

(iii) He decided that _____ was the best place for Sean to be while he was growing up, because _____.
[**Answer**: home; as a parent he could give Sean as much love and attention as possible--he should and he would]

To explain how Exercise A works, it is necessary to highlight the key points in some of the questions. The exercise as a whole is designed to foster the development of one's ability to make inferences and conceptual links, which demands the summoning of primarily pragmatic, and secondarily, grammatical, knowledge. In other words, responding to these questions requires something other than just lifting information directly from the text. In order to answer Question 1, for instance, the reader has to grasp the significance of the adjective *live* in the clause *it took us a long time to have a live baby*. The learner figures that normally, in referring to people and animals, one does not specify them to be living beings unless one wants to prevent the misunderstanding that they are not so. Hence the inferred emphasis here is that the baby in question is not dead. Thus, what has been said by Lennon in effect drops a strong hint at the unsaid: the couple have had miscarried or stillborn babies. The word *live* functions as an emphatic qualifier for the kind of baby that the Lennons had never been blessed with until Sean came along. Indeed, the meaning of *live* may require, firstly, confirmation through research on the interview subject's biography, and, secondly, the kind of inference ability described above.

To be able to answer Question 3, the learners have to extract the similarities between contemporary schools and prisons. In Question 4, the word *thing* is what has been called a "non-specific prop word" (Crystal and Davy, 1969, p. 114), whose meaning is undetermined until an inference is made from the subject of discussion and lexical collocation, which consists here of words such as *wide open*, *narrow*, *to compete*, *classroom*, and *prisons*. In actual fact, the exploration and re-exploration of meaning often force learners to move up the textual ranks in order to come up with an appropriate semantic choice. That is, they may have to move from the word to the phrase, to the clause, the full sentence, and may even have to consider how one sentence connects with others within the relevant unit of the text. As the role of *thing* is reconsidered against its broadening discoursal environment, its possible meanings are narrowed down.

To answer Question 5, the readers have to understand what is implied in the final group of utterances beginning with *When I realized I was sending him there to get rid of him*. Here what may very likely pose interpretation problems are *double doses of it* and *It's owed*. While the first occurrence of *it* may be easily understood to be a pronoun standing in place of the preceding *attention*, the entire phrase *double doses of it* defies ready grammatical analysis. The resolution lies in the discovery of metaphorical use of language which may well come by way of an explanation by the instructor, to the effect that both attention and medicine are therapeutic and can be thought of as being administered in

"doses." The last line *It's owed* has the reference *it* functioning anaphorically, referring to *attention* in an earlier speech act. The implied giver of attention is of course Lennon himself, whereas the implied beneficiary of his love is his son, Sean. The assertion can then be taken to mean the following: "This is the kind of attention that I, as a parent, owe Sean." Consider next Exercise B.

Exercise B

Explain in your own words why Sean's arrival was so important to Lennon and Yoko, and how he seemed to give Lennon's life new meaning. (To do so you could make use of your answers to Exercise A, building a draft out of them. Re-order the sentences and/or change their structures to meet your needs. Then put them together in a paragraph. You may begin the paragraph this way: *Sean's arrival was important to Lennon and Yoko because . . .*)

Exercise B serves a number of ends. The rationale is that after having been guided to perform step-by-step interpretation in Exercise A, learners should now be able to transform their own material, existing so far in the form of isolated sentences, into a paragraph. And this is what they are asked to do in this exercise. To do so effectively requires practice in sentence combination, ordering, and restructuring. Also for the sentences to cohere, learners would have to call into play cohesion devises such as *because*, *and*, *then*, *firstly*, *secondly*, and so on. In short, the learners are directed to such a level of awareness that they will submit not a patchwork of sentences but a running text that is a re-creation of meanings internalized.

It can be seen from the above discussion how reading and writing can be brought together by means of some *purposeful* activities based on a shared frame of reference. The theoretical assumption has been that reading and writing are different realizations of the same underlying process of an interpretive nature, and it is precisely this ability to interpret that the exercises are meant to develop. In Exercise B, writing revisits those strategies which learners have brought to bear in performing reading in Exercise A. There are only two differences. One is that Exercise B, asking for active efforts, also demands that a focus be identified. The other difference is that in reading, the internal dialogue takes place between the learner-reader and writer of the transcript, whereas in writing the roles are not the same. The internal dialogue now takes place between the learner-writer and final reader. To be sure, what has been suggested are not the only possible integrated exercises that might prove useful. An experienced instructor is bound to have a wealth of possible assignments to draw from, focusing on meaning, such as cloze tests, multiple-choice exercises, summary writing, etc. The crux of the matter is that

assignments designed to verify comprehension should be those which also challenge problem-solving ability (Widdowson, 1990, p. 138), and designed in such a way that the answers they elicit could function as inducement to writing activities that follow.

Having said all of the above, one cannot deny that the use of exercises such as the two discussed may be inadequate, the reason being that the learning process thus far is very much controlled, and language input on the part of the student limited. Moreover, since the kinds of reading and writing tasks that learners are asked to perform are controlled ones, it is likely that the limits of their intake may not have been probed, or that the range of their output may have been restricted. Therefore, at some crucial phase of the learning process, exercises which solicit more creativity are called for. There is an unargued need for the competing demands of fluency and accuracy to be dealt with. When that time comes, Exercise C below surely would invite lively discussion and contributions from the class.

Exercise C

(1) In transcribing the interview, the journalist retained the elliptical forms and lexical contractions actually spoken. What effect do they have on you as a reader? Why?

(2) What kinds of texts would retain elliptical and contracted forms? What texts would not? Explain why this is so.

Somewhere in the discussion that is generated by Question 1, learners should be made aware of the fact that the question *Why five years?*, though not grammatically *cohesive*, is pragmatically *coherent*. It is simply another example of oral communication in English being frequently effected not by overt syntactic elements but by covert communicative markers tied often to the level of lexis. The challenge is, obviously and painfully enough, in cultivating the awareness without using all the intimidating terminology. In Question 2, attention should be directed to the fact that clausal ellipsis and lexical contractions are a natural part of fluency in speech and of the immediacy common in face-to-face interactions. This is not to say, of course, that these constructions are not also frequently found in writing, such as in diaries, notes, advertisements, plays, and novels, where situational and dialectal veracity may well be a crucial part of the overall message. This same question also provides an opportunity to remind students that for academic or institutional types of writing as seen in reports, reference manuals, and scholarly journals, however, these forms would be considered unacceptable because, if for nothing else, they violate the rules of grammar and spelling.

Still more oral and written exercises demanding intensive reading and deeper reflection can be used as learners' capacity continues to develop. Some suggestions are

collected as Exercise D, which should be of particular interest to the more accomplished or more thoughtful of the students.

Exercise D

(1) Lennon gave a lengthy answer to the question posed by the journalist. His explanation consists of facts as well as opinion. Separate the facts from opinion, making two lists.

(2) Why does Lennon say that "most schools are prisons"? What is your opinion of schools, past and present? Provide concrete examples such as statistics, anecdotes, personal experience as a student, etc., to support your answer.

(3) Lennon has a strong opinion of how his child should be brought up. In your culture, how are children brought up? How would you have liked to be brought up? Why?

(4) Compare your notes in (3) above with those of your classmates who grew up in a culture different from yours. Write an essay comparing your experience with your classmates', and comment on your advantages and disadvantages.

(5) Provide a grammatically correct version of the question *Why five years?*. How does the fact that the question is transcribed verbatim in the text contribute to the overall style of the piece?

In this paper, the teaching of reading and writing is presented as an integrated and multi-level process in which the learner is being guided, step by step, to interpret a text while operating within systemic and schematic boundaries appropriate to his degree of proficiency. What has been discussed above is suggestive of what could be done with general texts, and how they could contribute to a beginning learner's grasp of reading and writing, more or less at the same time. However, since only part of a text is examined here, not its entirety, it may not be obvious that the pedagogical emphases mentioned at various points of the discussion are justifiably placed. The point remains, nonetheless, that when it comes to teaching reading and writing, there are some particularly crucial considerations which are effective in eliminating frequently-recurring obstacles to interpretation. They should therefore loom large on the teacher's mind. By venturing into other text-types, and by adopting a full text in each case, the instructor could help expose the learners to wide-ranging instances of language use. In so doing, he would have forced them to appreciate first-hand how far fluency and accuracy could go in fostering comprehension in various environments. Viewed from another angle, he would have begun to cultivate in learners their capacity to deal with form-function relationships in discourse, a capacity that is, after all, fundamental to success in reading and writing.

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